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Is *Sister Carrie* Really Not Anti-Capitalist at All?: Dreiser's Criticism of Capitalism

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Many critics and scholars have discussed how Dreiser is concerned with capitalism. Some exposed his fascination with the materialistic dream of success as a symptom of the vulgar attachment for capitalist values. Others praised his latent critiques of capitalism. In recent studies, Dreiser has emerged again as the most powerful writer in American literature that grasped the dynamics of American society in its capitalistic phase. Among others Walter Benn Michaels, in particular, maintains that *Sister Carrie* is a powerful novel because Carrie is depicted as an embodiment of the logic of the market at the turn of the century. This reading is valuable as a corrective to the conventional humanist interpretations toward which he directs his irritation. His observation, nevertheless, is questionable, for he refuses to see Dreiser's criticism of capitalism.

In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Michaels asserts "that Carrie's economy of desire involves an unequivocal endorsement of...the unrestrained capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." To him, "The power of *Sister Carrie*...derives not from its scathing 'picture' of capitalist 'conditions' but from its unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance of the economy that produced those conditions"(35). Michaels, on the other hand, dismisses as worthless any stance for or attempt at criticizing the shortcomings in capitalist society. "From this standpoint," he remarks, "even Dreiser's personal hostility to capitalism comes to seem like only the first of what would be many failed attempts to make his work morally respectable"(58).

It is, however, at least difficult to understand that "an unequivocal endorsement of…the unrestrained capitalism" should be compatible with "Dreiser's personal hostility to capitalism." Rather, we can assume that Michaels grudgingly admits that there is some kind of detachment from capitalism in *Sister Carrie*, even if he dismisses it as mere "personal hostility." Such a dismissal enables him to neglect the very structure of the novel in which Carrie's discontent and Hurstwood's failure toward the end of the novel suggest what is its problematics.

Rachel Bowlby, in *Just Looking*, makes her point by criticizing Michaels's one-sided picture: "the novel does not present a world in which capitalism in its hypothetical utopian form has been achieved. Behind the attractive images of consumption, it clearly shows up some of the peculiar disparities created by that institution in the form it took in the 1890s"(61). All the same, she also collapses this distinction by saying, "The Hurstwoods of the bread line and Brooklyn strikebreaking, struggling feebly and falling,…act only as the backdrop"(64). As a result, she, not unlike Michaels, talks more about the indefatigable power of consumer culture than Dreiser's critique of it, and shows little interest in reflecting upon "the peculiar disparities" depicted in the novel.

For all their likemindedness, Michaels discloses uneasiness about Bowlby's comment. In the introduction to his book, he gives an explanation for therein including the article that has invited Bowlby's chiding. "Bowlby is surely right about this," he says, "but my own unease had nothing to do with a sense that I had overstated my claim—what bothered me was the 'endorsement' itself, not whether it was 'unequivocal'"(18). Michaels keeps the phrase "an unequivocal endorsement of…the unrestrained capitalism" intact in the book, while he has dropped the passage quoted by Bowlby, "*Sister Carrie* is not anti-capitalist at all," a statement found in the article he had published in *Critical Inquiry* several years earlier. Does this not make him uneasy?

Michaels tries to justify his assertion by arguing that "transcending your origins in order to evaluate them" is wrong, "not so much because you can't really transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn't have any terms of evaluation left—except, perhaps, theological ones"(18). But "transcending your origins in order to evaluate them" is not the only possible way for cultural criticism. You can have other "terms of evaluation" than "theological ones." Otherwise, it would be very difficult for many people today to be engaged in cultural criticism, because they are usually atheistic. Michaels is unquestionably right when he argues: "It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don't like it or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too"(18). All the same it does not follow that you must like it.

Michaels talks about capitalist society as if it were a monolithic world with no residual or emergent antagonism in it. In other words, he denies the feasibility of not only Dreiser's but also any other critique of capitalism. In any culture some kind of conflict or division exists. It appears as a contradiction in representation by those writers who have grasped the culture in depth. Michaels, however, is not ready to explore such a problem. On the contrary, he cannot mention it without making it seem meaningless. This is not unlike his method with which he argues in *Against Theory* that intention and meaning as well as knowledge and belief are one and the same thing. In a similar vein, he dismisses what may be in conflict with "an unequivocal endorsement of...the unrestrained capitalism" as products of "Dreiser's personal hostility to capitalism." His dismissal is all too easy, as facile as Bowlby's shrugging off pictures of poverty in *Sister Carrie* "only as the backdrop" (Bowlby 64).

Michaels's case may in effect come to a political message that capitalism is a totalitarian system from which no one can escape so that one can only accept it to find happiness in it. This message is almost the same as Ames's view which Michaels interprets as an embodiment of the Howellsian economy of scarcity, for according to Michaels, Ames is preaching to Carrie, "You are happy if you are satisfied with what you have" (34). To Michaels, Ames, holding up a false ideal, is not perceptive to the truth of "the equation of power with desire" (34). But, when bantering "the newly politicized proponents of 'oppositional' criticism," Michaels says, "[T]transforming the moral handwringing of the fifties and sixties first into the epistemological handwringing of the seventies and now into the political handwringing of the eighties does not seem to be much of an advance" (14n). In despising "handwringing," Michaels coincides with Ames, for Ames also says, "It doesn't do us any good to wring our hands over the far-off things" (*SC* 355). As Michaels contends, their difference lies in what they regard as futile to seek. According to Michaels, the desire for "the far-off things" in the realm of consumption is a source of power, but to long for "the far-off things" in the political arena is a sign of impotence.

The "far-off things" in the political arena are, in other words, the objects of "the Utopian impulse." If so, Michaels's reading of *Sister Carrie* may well attract the attention of Fredric Jameson, who tried in *The Political Unconscious* to bring out "the Utopian impulse" (157) as the political unconscious latent in the text of important literary works. Jameson called Dreiser "our greatest novelist" (161), and characterized the realism of Dreiser as well as Scott and Balzac "by a fundamental and exhilarating heterogeneity in their raw materials and by a corresponding versatility in their narrative apparatus" (104). "Heterogeneity" was Jameson's term for Dreiser's contradictions. If it be true, as Michaels claims, that *Sister Carrie* means "an unequivocal endorsement of…the unrestrained capitalism," there would be no room for "the Utopian impulse" that Jameson found in it. Jameson, then, owed it to himself to plead his own case against Michaels, whose argument may be capable of scandalizing almost all of the preceding Dreiser criticisms.

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson discloses his view of Michaels's theoretical premises. Against Michaels's stipulation about the impossibility of transcending one's own culture, Jameson resorts to the basics of Marxism: “the force of Marxism as such,” as Jameson says, lies in “a demonstration of the ways in which socialism was already coming into being within capitalism” (205-6). Upon such a premise rests his criticism of Michaels: “This model of the presence of the future within the present is then clearly quite different from the attempt to ‘step outside’ actually existing reality into some other space” (206).

In philosophical terms, Jameson characterized Michaels’s posture as immanence which has long been set against transcendence. Abhorrence of transcendence connects Michaels with the old New Critics who denunciated the criticism called extrinsic which was their epithet to characterize transcendence. And Jameson himself too, in his peculiar way, sometimes betrays a predilection for immanence, by confirming “the priority of literary and cultural analysis over philosophical and ideological investigation” (209). What he points out, nevertheless, remains worth remembering. The “model of the presence of the future within the present” is a dialectic solution of the contradiction between immanence and transcendence, which will allow us to have terms of evaluation other than theological ones without transcending our culture.

As Michaels says, Dreiser had a “personal hostility to capitalism” while he was attached to the power of it. Certainly this is a contradiction, but to grapple with this kind of contradiction was central in his struggle as a writer. His contradictions have been pointed out often enough to become a cliché in the study of Dreiser. Both Michaels and Bowlby indeed ignore Dreiser’s criticism of capitalism, and, in doing so, fail to grasp Dreiser’s complexity. If his contradictory attitude to capitalism is a problem, it is rather his criticism of capitalism to which one should now give more attention, without resolving his ambivalence. The other side, namely his fascination with the power and wealth of capitalist America, has been recognized often enough, whether it may be condemned as a symptom of his vulgarity, or admired as a bold insight into the power of capitalism.

Beneath Dreiser’s criticism of capitalism lies his sympathy with the working-class people. His attitude toward them, however, was never consistent or stable. Because of his own impoverished childhood and young manhood, he sometimes sympathized with the poor, and sometimes felt disgusted with them. He wavered between hatred and pity, narcissism and self-criticism, which brought about his lifelong contradictions that shaped the structure of his writings. The sympathy with the poor in *Sister Carrie* rests upon Dreiser's own experiences and his tenacious efforts to explore their meaning. He knows well that he cannot express such sympathy without taking some risks and raising as implications some criticism of capitalism. He expresses it more unequivocally in his nonfiction writings like his travel books and autobiographies. By taking them also into account, we can have a more judicious picture of his attempts to make sense of American society as he knew it.

In *Newspaper Days*, for example, Dreiser writes how he as a reporter was shocked to find ugliness in all walks of life. Discrepancies between reality and idealism in America were incompatible with the precepts Howells had preached about "the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American." Among many disillusioning experiences, the most recurrent and disturbing was the labor question: workers' poverty, strife between capital and labor, and the press's cowardice about this question. When he was assigned to cover a streetcar strike in Toledo, Ohio, he wrote an article about it for the *Toledo Blade*. A part of the story, which includes an episode of a scab being attacked by the hostile crowd, went into the strike scene in *Sister Carrie*.

The decisive moment for Dreiser, however, came when he worked in Pittsburgh. Though his stay there was relatively brief, Pittsburgh was to him an important revelation, as he recalls, "Never in my life, neither before nor since, in New York, Chicago or elsewhere, was the vast gap which divides the rich from the poor in America so vividly and forcefully brought home to me" (326). While he was fascinated with the wealth of business magnates like Andrew Carnegie, he was also much concerned about the sense of defeat and sullen despair of the workers in the town of Homestead, where the great steel strike had been bitterly fought only a year and a half earlier. As usual he was not free to write about the conditions of the workers there. The city ditor told him, a new reporter: "We don't touch on labor conditions xcept through our labor man...and he knows what to say. There's othing to be said about the rich or religious in a derogatory sense" 338).

In effect, what the city editor called "our labor man" became one f the two men who caught Dreiser's eye. "He," as Dreiser recolected, "was an intense sympathizer with labor, but not so much with rganized as with unorganized workers" (331). While Dreiser was nitiated even to the ideas of socialism through this man, Dreiser says bout the Pittsburgh newspapermen in general, "Never had I encountered more intelligent or helpful or companionable albeit cynical men than I found here" (330). It is from these senior colleagues that he received lessons in hard-boiled cynicism, which would later serve him as an acquired defense mechanism. At the same time, not forgetting the plight of the poor, Dreiser had to caution himself against the hardened egoism of a social climber, into which he was always on the brink of falling.

But few critics have paid attention to his self-criticism, as Arun Mukherjee in her *The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel* points out: "His bitter irony was probably incomprehensible to his critics as they judged the vulgarity of youthful Dreiser's aims as personal failure" (53). According to Mukherjee's reading of Dreiser's novels, the logic of social Darwinism or individualism apparently held up in them is nothing but parodies, i.e. ironical expressions, of the rhetoric that the defenders of capitalism were using in the contemporary America of the time. Her interpretation implies that Dreiser achieved sterling criticism of capitalism from the beginning of his career. Her judgment may, indeed, be open to the charge of committing an error of simplifying his ambivalence, though in her case, contrary to Michaels's, it is Dreiser's fascination with capitalism that is ignored. Nevertheless, Mukherjee is sensitive to Dreiser's self-criticism and his criticism of American culture, raising an important question that has seldom been considered.

Only after criticizing his own individualism and snobbery through which he had craved for affluent status or affected Bohemianism, could

Dreiser come to terms with life. The difficulty to do so had led him to his peculiar contradiction and ambivalence toward the power of capitalism. However, unless we forget that his individualism was always in conflict with his sympathy for the struggling poor, we can confirm that the latter won out after all, because his writings in the 1930s and after show clearly that he reached the negation of individualism. In fact, his interest in the working class and the labor movement was long-standing, beginning from the start of his writing career as a newspaperman, and continuing throughout his career to condition his imaginative literary works. Thus, despite its ambivalence, we can nevertheless trace his criticism of American capitalism, which constantly crops out through his writings.

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A New Historicist Reading of Dreiser's Fiction: Money, Labor, and Ideals

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When Emile Zola coined the term naturalism he focused on setting life in its more brutal and unpleasant sense. Zola attributed this dark side of life as determined by environment and heredity. Few can say Zola is wrong, but I do wish to question the foundation of critics placing Theodore Dreiser's work in such a category. Dreiser dealt with harsh situations, but is life not a tragedy? Without a doubt every thinking individual must answer yes to such a question. Although we would rather focus on the more pleasant side of life, as William Dean Howells advocated, being human somehow leaves each of us with the reality that life is a tragedy.

Charles Shapiro explains that Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* has a steady theme which explains why, for Clyde Griffiths and others, tragedy exists in America (91). Now, this does not seem to exactly fit the definition of naturalism; however, realism, or the surface appearance of life, has to play a role. Clyde is an ordinary person, and he faces everyday situations. As stated above, characters in a naturalist's setting act upon something stemming from their heredities or backgrounds. Are we, as Dreiser's audience, then to assume Clyde's parents are not to be included in that heredity? Indeed, Dreiser takes pains to emphasize the fact that Clyde is an ordinary person and reality is brutal regardless of how we look at it. Sex and wealth do form a fatal attraction for Clyde. But the failure of business, the failure of religion, and most importantly the failure of the family, all come out in the history of Clyde Griffiths (Shapiro 81).

Shapiro states something interesting about naturalists which bolsters the points made above: "Naturalists, we are informed, are amoral because they assume man is a puppet" (82). He takes this observation a few steps further by refuting the idea that Dreiser's fiction is without moral sense. Finally, referring to *An American Tragedy*, Shapiro sums up his feelings with "It is a warm exciting novel, a book about the believable anguish of a confused boy in a changing, confusing America" (83). Clyde here is a victim of a reality that countless numbers of Americans face. He sees wealth and social standing as all there is to life in America.

Clyde's values, then, all center around money and what he can do with that money. This is an intriguing question because it seems central to the lives of so many Americans. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to discuss money as a symbol of labor for Clyde and then identify labor as his determinant of value by comparing his realistic desires to the ideals of his parents. To unfold this thesis and relate it to my interpretation of *An American Tragedy* as not a strict naturalistic novel but more of a realistic novel, this argument will go against the grain of heredity playing such a major role. Instead, my reading of the novel will stem from Shapiro's thoughts about the novel as a believable anguish reproduced faithfully. This reading will show how the consumerism aspect of the novel makes it more realistic and representational.

To understand what fuels Clyde's desire, one must gain an understanding of how Dreiser understood money. Walter Benn Michaels goes into great detail about Dreiser's thoughts on money and labor in an essay titled "*Sister Carrie*'s Popular Economy." The first step in my argument is to apply Michaels' observations about *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy*. From this, one should see that both novels have a great deal in common in relation to what money stands for in Dreiser's fiction.

Michaels seems fascinated with the famous scene from *Sister Carrie* where Carrie first accepts money from Drouet: "two soft, green handsome ten-dollar bills" (*Carrie* 63). With this in mind, Michaels supplies Dreiser's true meaning of money: "He [Dreiser] says first that money 'stands for…stored energy' and hence should be 'paid out…honestly' and 'not as a usurped privilege.' When this is understood, 'many of our social, religious, and political troubles will have permanently passed.'" Once Michaels' readers have digested this, he turns to a second fold in relation to the first: "He [Dreiser] then emphasizes what he calls 'the relative value of the thing,' invoking the example of the wealthy traveler stranded on a desert island, where all the money in the world has 'no value' because there is nothing to buy and no one to buy from" (Michaels 31). An argument is then established as one can likely see, for the quotes above are alike in some respects but they do not go hand in hand.

The true meaning of money as honestly-stored energy has to relate to a labor theory. That theory hinges on the idea that labor alone can never vary in its own value. For the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can be estimated is by labor alone. Money is a symbol of labor, and labor is the determinant of value. Boiled down, this means that only a real price exists. Money is only there in the naming of the price (Michaels 31).

To better understand the concept of stored energy as opposed to that of relative value, one might have an example with the fact that all economies have commodities. Those commodities which are exchanged at the amount of labor required to produce them is always an equal exchange in theory. Thus a power, privilege, or unequal exchange is impossible (Michaels 32). How does Clyde fit into all of this equation? The first time Clyde encounters what he considers a great deal of money is in Chapter 5 of the novel:

> Mr. Squires then proceeded to explain that this hotel only paid fifteen dollars a month and board…. But, and this information came as a most amazing revelation to Clyde, every guest for whom any of these boys did anything—gave him a tip, and often quite a liberal one…. And

> these tips…averaged from four to six dollars a day…most amazing pay, Clyde now realized. (*Tragedy* 37)

It is not a shock to Dreiser's readers to learn that Clyde's heart gives an enormous jump at the mention of so large a sum of money: "from four to six dollars! Why, that was twenty-eight to forty-two dollars a week!" (37). Here the commodity is how fast and lucky each of the bell-boys is. There seems no way to evaluate the economy based upon such a thing as a liberal tip averaging from four to six dollars a day. This also points toward Dreiser the realist. Readers find encouragement for Clyde. His enthusiasm evokes anything but pessimism.

The problem Michaels has with Dreiser's relative value of the product lies first in the case where money serves as a symbol of labor. Labor is fixed and the only way the value of money can become meaningful is where it can spent. One of two things must occur for money to become relevant: (1) money must be divorced from labor or (2) the value of labor itself must be seen as relative or meaningful only where it can be spent (Michaels 32). The idea of relative value of labor, therefore, has to have a nominal value placed on it; that is, labor is itself conceived as a commodity. Finally, to bring this full circle, Michaels quotes economist Adam Smith: "although 'equal quantities of labour are always equal value to the labourer, yet to the person who employs him they appear sometimes to be of greater and sometimes of smaller value. He purchases them sometimes with a greater and sometimes with a smaller quantity of goods.' Here labor is itself conceived as a commodity, whose value, furthermore, varies according toconditions" (Michaels 32).

What Michaels recognizes as a discrepancy in Dreiser's definition is that a capitalist economy finds labor itself as a cheap commodity. For Michaels, citing Marx, shows that a certain amount of labor goes unpaid in a capitalist system. Finally, with the unpaid labor we find that the commodities labor produces are greater than the value of the labor itself (Michaels 32). Again, to understand Clyde from the root of Michaels' thinking, one might listen to Hegglund's words in *An American Tragedy*: "An' after dey give you your uniform, an' you go work, don't forgit to give de captain a dollar after every watch efore you leave.... Dat's de way it is here. We work togedder like at, an' you gotta do dat if you wanta hold your job" (Tragedy 39). his quotation is quite an eye opener for Clyde. For he sees that part f his twenty-four or thirty-two dollars is gone. It has suddenly windled down to eleven or twelve. . .

With the idea that a labor-for-labor exchange allows for no cheating and in a labor-for-profit exchange the essence of capitalism appears; we can again turn to Dreiser. He does not notice that a iscrepancy between stored energy and relative value exists. What he ells us is that profit may be understood but likely fuels our social, eligious, and political troubles. Consequently, profit cannot be paid ut honestly because products have different nominal or monetary alues. How does this apply to Clyde? Dreiser makes clear how the Green-Davidson commodity value works with Hegglund again, as he xplains to Clyde how to serve the customers:

> "...after dat all you gotta do is to carry up de bags to de room. Den all you gotta do is to turn on de lights in de bathroom and closet, if dere is one, so dey'll know where dey are, see. An' den raise de curtains in de day time or lower 'em at night, an' see if dere's towels in de room, so you can tell de maid if dere ain't, and den if dey don't give you no tip, you gotta go, only most times, unless you draw a stiff, all you gotta do is hang back a little—make a stall, see—fumble wit de door-key or try de transom, see. Den, if dey're any good, dey'll hand you a tip. If dey don't , your out." (*Tragedy* 38-39)

Hegglund drags out the process, but the most important thing to notice is profit comes from luck. Hegglund has discovered that ways exist like "hang[ing] back a little" which betters the chance of profit. This is the essence of labor-for-profit exchange and no doubt a certain amount of labor goes unpaid. One could interpret Hegglund's tactics as cheating. As far as tips are concerned, however, it is impossible for profit to be paid out honestly. Michaels is right in maintaining that money is Clyde's symbol of labor and that labor functions as his determinant of value.

Michaels argues that Dreiser does not recognize the discrepancy between money and labor (Michaels 33). Carrie sees money as power. She sees others with money and decides that she must have some. Michaels concludes that if she were trapped on a desert island with $20, she would be unable to see the labor behind the money and only recognize and reflect on having $20 worth of power and no way to use it (33). Clyde would have a similar reaction; only he would think of Hortense Briggs or Sondra Finchley and where they could go and spend the money.

The gap in Dreiser's thoughts on money and labor that Michaels recognizes feeds the idea that Dreiser attempted to capture life in its surface appearance for the most part. One cannot deny that with Book One ending in the young girl's death, Book Two ending with Roberta's death, and Book Three ending with Clyde's death, the novel certainly presents the dark side of life. And yet this story is not strict naturalism. Therefore, with the remainder of this essay I wish to focus on Clyde's realistic desires. The points above concerning money and labor open the opportunity to touch on Clyde's realistic desires sparked by something much stronger than the ideals set by his parents.

In examining Clyde Griffiths one has to assume that Dreiser intended Clyde's downfall to show the influence of the capitalist American economy. To support this, one must consider the possibility that had Clyde been privileged enough to have wealth and social position, he would not likely have been tempted to make a moral decision in relation to Roberta Alden.This uncovers a theme of social inequality resulting from a lack of monetary privilege. Keeping social inequality in mind, one must also consider that Clyde was born and raised by parents he is ashamed of. If money for Carrie was something others had and she absolutely must get, for Clyde money meant a way out of a situation that embarrassed him. Dreiser characterizes Clyde as follows:

> Plainly pagan rather than religious, life interested him, although as yet he was not fully aware of this. All that could be truly said of him now was that there was no definite appeal in all this for him. He was too young, his mind much too responsive to phases of beauty and pleasure which had little, if anything, to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother and father. (*Tragedy* 9)

Dreiser thus sets the stage for his character Clyde to escape from the ideals set by his parents and seek the American dream.

Morals govern the life of man and ultimately we are responsible for the consequences. Clyde is trapped, however. The American dream has a hold on him, but he has been too sheltered to recognize the hold. Dreiser makes sure to note that Clyde understands that he is lacking in education. Dreiser is telling his audience that Clyde, even with his far off desires, can never achieve them. Ironically, the desirable situation that he yearns for so early in the novel can never be. For his parents, equally naive, have ideals which keep all of the Griffiths trapped in their religious world.

Robert Shafer finds *An American Tragedy* "skillfully, faithfully, and consistently executed on the naturalistic level" (268). I have to disagree, for it is my feeling that Dreiser is telling the reader that holding a child in a sheltered, uneducated, religious world can be harmful. Clyde is too naive when he reaches for his dream. This Shafer interprets as a dark dream Dreiser concocted out of a "sensational newspaper story long drawn out" (268). One finds a deeper lesson punching at the dark surface. Dreiser indeed tells the reader that money can corrupt. The easiest victim would be a poor, naive boy seeking something better.

To argue that *An American Tragedy* is a purely naturalistic novel seems absurd, based on Clyde's psychological, social, and economic backgrounds so vigorously portrayed throughout the text. Clyde is trying to find something better. I find myself pulling for him especially in scenes where he seeks a position at Green-Davidson. This reaction seems natural and spontaneous after considering the way Irving Howe defined Dreiser's characters:

> They suffer from a need that their lives assume the dignity of dramatic form, and they suffer terribly, not so much because they cannot satisfy this need, but because they do not really understand it. Money, worldly success, sensual gratification, are the only ends they know or can name, but none of these slakes their restlessness. (144)

Howe sees Dreiser's characters struggling so hard for success that they remain confused, yet always hoping "for some unexpected sign by which to release their bitter craving for a state of grace or, at least, illumination" (144). This is why the reader pulls for Clyde; he is an underdog. Dreiser uses Clyde to relay a message not unlike he does with Ames in *Sister Carrie*. Ames explains to Carrie that the world is full of desirable situations. Yet ultimately Ames' thoughts refute that one is not powerful if one wants money; one is powerful if one has money. Ames simply states that one is happy if one is satisfied with what one has. He serves to criticize the habits of material success. Clyde, however, serves to show what happens if one's spirit is so naive that it seeks to attain the higher calling of the American dream.

When Robert Penn Warren calls Clyde's life an experiment performed in its purity, he directly hits the terrible cost of failure in the American ideal: "The contrast of the whole human project set against the lurking darkness of the primal woods and waters—all these factors give the action a kind of paradigmatic precision of outline and archetypal clarity of meaning" (272). Warren calls the novel an experiment, yet it remains a factual one which lets us see Clyde romance his dream not understood by either himself or his parents.

Tragedy implies a flight against an overwhelming force and then an eventual fall. Thus Dreiser attacks position and money and what it can do to the self in America. Despite what many traditional critics contend, Dreiser is not a strict naturalist in this sense. Irving Howe may have expressed it best with "in Dreiser's handling, is not at all hat sort of listless fatality that hostile critics would make it seem." Rather, Howe sees the human struggle reaching the rough edge of ndividual limits; then he pushes it a bit further: "That mostly they Dreiser's characters] fail is Dreiser's tribute to reality" (143). Dreiser does present dark situations as Warren contends, but above all Dreiser teaches a lesson left over from Ames in *Sister Carrie*. That esson is simply that heredity and upbringing have little influence on Clyde's seeking his dream. The tragedy occurs as Clyde fails to understand that happiness in the American dream comes with satisfaction—something he does not have the mental capacity to understand.

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Monetary Reduction in New Historicist Readings of Dreiser

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The great commoner William Jennings Bryan captured the Democratic party's presidential nomination in 1896 with his "Cross of Gold Speech," a speech that ended with the line: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor the crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." Another great commoner from the midwest, Theodore Dreiser, admired Bryan, supported his position on "free silver," and watched him speak twice in New York City during the 1896 campaign. This connection of monetary policy, Bryan, and Dreiser will bring us in a circuitous fashion to a critical examination of New Historicism, an influential trend in literary criticism whose advocates have explored Dreiser's work as representative of literary realism. These New Historicists, including Walter Benn Michaels, Phillip Fisher, and John Vernon, discount previous interpretations of Dreiser's fiction, claiming that Dreiser not only failed to depict and chastise the inhumanity of capitalism, but he ultimately advocated the excesses of the American marketplace.

In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* Michaels asserts that previous readers of Dreiser were asking questions that could not be answered, questions that "posit a space outside the culture in order then to interrogate the relations between the space (here defined as literary) and the culture" (27). Since in Michaels' view such a movement to a space beyond one's culture is untenable, the question of Dreiser's attack or support of capitalism is absurd. Michaels maintains a dichotomy between Dreiser's supposed "intentions" as a writer of fiction who condemned the abuses of the American market and his actual product, novels such as *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier* that rticipate in the excesses of that market. Michaels states this bluntly: should like to suggest here that Carrie's economy of desire in- lves an unequivocal endorsement...of unrestrained capitalism" (35).

After dismissing Dreiser as a social critic, Michaels, employing an alysis of *Sister Carrie*, extrapolates Dreiser's "real" relationship to pitalism:

> When, for instance, Carrie, thrilled by Ames' description of the "pathos" of her "natural look"—the "shadow" about her eyes the "peculiar" pout of her lips—longs "to be equal to this feeling written upon her countenance," her longing marks what Dreiser appears to think of as a constitutive discrepancy with the self. The desire to live up to the look on your face (to become what is written on your face) is the desire to be equal to oneself (to transform that writing into marks). It is the logic of the gold standard, the desire to make yourself equal to your face value, to become gold. (21-22)

While this examination is fascinating, the content of Michaels' interpretation is less to the point than is the method itself, which employs close readings of brief passages to claim Dreiser's complicity with laissez-faire capitalism. In the above quotation Michaels equates the desire for goods, the desire to consume, with Carrie's face, then Michaels equates Carrie's face with Dreiser's own insatiable desires, and finally Michaels equates Dreiser's insatiable desires with an endorsement of consumer capitalism.

In Michaels' reading of *The Financier*, a similar dichotomy is drawn between what Dreiser intended when writing and the actual product of those intentions. In drawing this distinction, Michaels again relies exclusively on close textual readings of brief passages. When divining Dreiser's stance toward capitalism Michaels states: "In an economy where nature has taken the place of work, financial success can no longer be understood as payment of goods or services. It becomes, instead, a gift, and for Dreiser this economy of the gift functions at every level" (78). Michaels maintains the commonplace point that the naturalists, including Dreiser, employed the evolutionary theories of Darwin and more particularly the social theories of Spencer to justify robber-baron practices. While this prevalent contention ignores Spencer's and Dreiser's more complicated considerations of progress through social evolution, Michaels expands this theory to reveal the extent to which Dreiser associates all aspects of life with nature and all aspects of nature with capricious fortuity, thus undermining any self-reflexive ability humans might have in determining or intending their actions. These assumptions concerning Dreiser's thinking, writing, and intentions, act as the premises for Michaels' more controversial claim that portrays Dreiser as one of capitalism's most ardent supporters, an advocate who reduced art and human relationships to monetary exchange. To corroborate this argument Michaels cites the well-known scene from *The Financier* in which a lobster eats a squid. He assumes that this act of a lobster eating a squid is Dreiser's simple allegory concerning the relationship of nature and the marketplace. Yet Michaels ignores an intricate passage that immediately follows the lobster and squid scene, one in which the young Cowperwood contemplates the value, meaning, and purpose of gold, a passage that is far more relevant to the essence of Michaels' argument, but one that is difficult to interpret simplistically and one that returns us to the relationship of Dreiser, monetary policy, and William Jennings Bryan.

The narrator's description of Cowperwood's early mercantile epiphany, which occurs immediately after seeing the lobster eat the squid, is quoted here at some length to reveal a multiplicity of motives and intentions in Dreiser's writing, a multiplicity that is often ignored or dismissed as "muddled" thinking:

> He [young Cowperwood] began to see clearly what was meant by money as a medium of exchange, and how all values were calculated according to one primary value, that of gold. If gold were high or scarce, money was said to be tight, and times were bad. If gold was plentiful, money was easy, credits were large, and business was

> flourishing. Young Cowperwood finally studies all this out for himself, coming to a clear understanding of banking as a machine for doing business. It facilitated, as he saw it, the exchange of this general medium, gold, or its certificates of presence and deposit and ownership. Finance fascinated him much as art might fascinate another boy, or literature another. He was a financier by instinct, and all the knowledge that pertained to that great art was as natural to him as the emotions and abilities of life are to a poet. This medium of exchange, *gold*, interested him intensely. He asked his father where it came from, and when told that it was mined, dreamed that he owned a gold-mine and waked to wish that he did. Even what gold was made of—its chemical constituents—interested and held his attention. He marveled that it ever came to be, and how it was finally selected as the medium or standard of exchange. So all those piles of bills on his father's desk—those yellow and green papers—represented gold deposited somewhere, or claimed to be deposited. If they were worth their face value, the gold was where the certificate said it was; if the certificate was not worth its face value, the presence of the gold was in question, or hard to get at, just so much as the certificate was discounted. He was interested in stocks and bonds, too, which were constantly being deposited as collateral; and he learned that some stocks and bonds were not worth the paper they were written on, and that others were worth much more than their face value indicated. (18)

This passage continues with Dreiser revealing several perspectives from which we can view Cowperwood's financial transactions. First, as a supporter of William Jennings Bryan and the Populist movement calling for "free silver," this quotation is ironic to the extent that Dreiser was incensed that the value of money was too closely connected to gold and that this resulted in some of the drastic economic swings (the excesses) that hurt poor workers and farmers, while usually benefiting wealthy investors such as Cowperwood, who is shown at the end of the novel becoming extremely wealthy in a "down" or "panicked" market.

In an 1896 editorial for *Ev'ry Month*, Dreiser, in response to the financial crisis that occurred during the winter of 1895-96, criticized a silent Eastern oligarchy of financiers who control the economy and the government of the United States by controlling gold. Far from wishing to return to a gold standard Dreiser recognized the extent to which gold is a *medium* of the rich "who never speak with their mouth but signal each other by the 'glance significant' and mark their meaning with the sign of gold" (*Uncollected Prose* 45). Not only were Dreiser's sympathies always vehemently on the side of "free silver," but he argued throughout his life that monetary value was not based on an absolute "gold standard," not set by a natural law or a mineral of natural value but was set by a medium of exchange, communication, and power, that could be gold or that could be sea shells. The real power was in the hands of those few who controlled the supply of any scarce but highly desired medium. Gold is a *medium*, like paint for an artist or like words for a poet, and for this reason Dreiser and Cowperwood associate finance with art. It is because of the spirituality or the abstractness of the medium, not because of its physicality, that finance becomes a form of art, a form of religion under capitalism. In a Descartes-like meditation on the constituent physical properties of gold, Cowperwood is left with a mystery: Gold just happens to be the element to which money and securities are tied. The extent to which Cowperwood is fascinated by the abstract qualities of finance and not the gross material aspects is evidenced by his quick removal from the commodity exchange, where "actual" goods are bartered, to the securities exchange, where no physical goods are exchanged, except the mysterious *medium* of gold, which is never seen.

In Dreiser's philosophical and scientific work, *Notes on Life*, gold and money as *media* by which means a financier or an artist may satisfy spiritual, not physical, longings is explored. Dreiser maintains complex definition of *value*, one that undermines New Historicist nterpretations: "A discovered diamond may weigh an ounce or twenty arats and be of a certain clarity and radiance. But its value is somehing else.... There are no fixed values or value measures" (120). In onsidering the "real" value of 100,000 or 1,000,000,000 dollars, reiser reflects that money is of value relative to its power to purhase houses, a railroad, a company, a yacht, stocks in a company, old, or silver. There is no mention, as Michaels suggests, that Dreser held the Marxist view that the value of money is or should be tied o labor. Dreiser then asks: "How exactly real" is the relative value of noney? (132).

He answers that, with the aid of printed paper, labeled money, tocks, "or actual piles of bullion—gold or silver" (132), money can eem quite real; but, when translating this real value into physical bjects, the connection between the money and the goods is always ependent on social convention, and he concludes: "...these values re variable, relative, and never definite or real according to any fixed tandard, because there is no fixed standard" (132). In exemplifying the shifting values of goods Dreiser examines two seemingly unrelated items: Christian relics and gold certificates. The relics had great value and efficacy at times of religious fervor, and the gold certificates, until the crash of 1929, represented a quantity of gold, yet each were of little value in the 1930s. The association by Dreiser of religious and monetary artifacts brings us to the substitution in a capitalist society of money for God and of the financier for the priest.

This also brings us to the complex and at times contradictory thoughts of Dreiser that cannot be reductively stated as anti or pro capitalism. Not only do Dreiser's fictional works participate in and justify capitalism as Michaels argues, but his philosophical works and fiction self-reflexively recognize and analyze the association of natural laws and a market economy. Dreiser, on the other hand, attacks the excesses of capitalism and calls for reform—this is the contradiction of Dreiser, but it is also the contradiction of the human condition. It is not that Dreiser believes, as Michaels states, that capitalism is the "greatest social evil." Dreiser laments the injustices of capitalism that are caused not by a market economy but by individuals who are unwilling to express openly the values inherent in a consumer society. Dreiser attributes the greatest harm done by capitalism, or the oligarchy of the wealthy, not to the market place, but to silence, to absent power.

What Michaels' analysis lacks in attempting to associate Dreiser and the naturalists with a "gold standard," an absolute connection between word and object, between thought and nature, and, ultimately, between art, religion, and all human enterprises and laws of nature, is the extent to which Dreiser and others depict finance and art as transcendental. Michaels thus misses the complexity of Dreiser, really the post-modernity of Dreiser, in portraying gold and words not as absolutes. As *media* of abstraction these symbol systems are often governed by physical or natural laws, but they often dangerously depart from natural law, as evidenced by the "gold standard" itself. Dreiser indeed associated the "gold standard" with all genteel standards that were unnatural, because they froze certain values or abstractions in order to benefit those with power.

Michaels' book is considered here at length because it is one of the more clever reproaches of Dreiser, but there are other New Historicist readings of Dreiser, such as John Vernon's *Money and Fiction*, that also undermine the social purpose of Dreiser's fiction. Vernon creates an analogy in which he equates the realist's attempt to represent society with paper money's claim to represent gold (7). Vernon then examines Dreiser as the paradigmatic realist, a realist whose fiction concerns monetary exchanges. Vernon creates a formula of inverse proportion that can be stated simply as: the more a novel is concerned with or focused on money, and all of Dreiser's novels concern money, the less realistic a novel is. As a result, Vernon is left to conclude that Dreiser, the "great American realist," is one of the least realistic writers, since his novels are preoccupied with money, and any author whose works are preoccupied with money is under a delusion that conflates signified and signifier, whether this be word and object or money and gold: "The transition from metal currency to paper money indicates a more general cultural shift that submitted immediate reality to a kind of semantic coding; and the realistic novel was part of this shift" (18). For Vernon and for J. Hillis Miller, upon whom Vernon relies, money becomes a human fiction in that it is a collective hallucination that acts as "both social glue and social solvent" (19). Vernon concludes that Dreiser's novels, unlike previous fiction, increasingly focus on money and that, when Dreiser's fiction focuses on money, it becomes less realistic and more representational, more of a fiction and thus further from "reality."

What is extraordinary in Vernon's account is that he assumes money has somehow moved away from "real" value and that words have somehow moved away from "real" meaning. He further asserts that Dreiser was unaware of this shift. In applying this theory, Vernon assumes Dreiser was a naive realist who misguidedly believed that money and words still had an absolute value. Not only is this not true of Dreiser, but Dreiser's own writings move beyond Vernon's and Michaels' criticism in recognizing the relative value not only of paper money but of gold itself and of any media including words.

The failure of New Historicist interpretations of Dreiser are attributable to three contradictions. First and most ironically, while claiming that Dreiser asserts an anti-capitalistic dogma but writes a fiction that fails both to represent reality and to criticize capitalism, Michaels and Vernon themselves suffer from an inability to escape their own ideologies, to read Dreiser sympathetically, to meet him halfway. What are Dreiser's intentions and what are his assumptions in writing *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier*, and *An American Tragedy*?[1] Why would Dreiser write three of his eight major works of fiction with Frank Cowperwood as the main character, an American millionaire? Why, to some extent, do Dreiser's other novels, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Bulwark*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The "Genius"* explore the motives and lifestyles of the rich? Michaels' observations are correct. Dreiser is unable to separate himself from capitalism. But Dreiser, far less than Michaels, was not purely a product of capitalism; he was influenced by religious, agrarian, barter, and labor ideologies that have increasingly succumbed to consumer capitalism.

This first contradiction of New Historicism leads to a second one that Fredric Jameson explores in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Why is it that a writer such as Dreiser, who was associated with social criticism and "left-wing" causes all his life, whose works are consistently read as critical of the excesses of capitalism and consumer lust, can be so easily and summarily dismissed as, not a social critic, but a bulwark of capitalism, a master of ideological containment? Why has everyone read Dreiser incorrectly? Why did Dreiser think he was writing social criticism? Why have so many readers thought of his novels as social criticism? Why did the Federal Bureau of Investigation spend more than twenty years spying on Dreiser and compiling an extensive file on his "subversive" activities? As answer to this crucial question it is necessary to return to a rhetorical analysis that reconnects intention and act, that avoids this separation that Michaels imposes between what Dreiser intends and what Dreiser wrote.

Dreiser's first and most often stated intention is that his art will counter the genteel fiction that failed to adequately depict the money motive at work within American society. In a manuscript in the Dreiser collection entitled "American Tragedies," Dreiser argues that the wealthy of America achieved their fortunes by graft, perjury, political dishonesty, and murderous cruelty, yet the popular fiction of his time depicted young men and women achieving wealth by marriage. Dreiser wanted to participate in capitalism, in "consumer lust," to the degree that he wished to honestly depict how these motives for wealth affected people. Dreiser desired to show how money does motivate human beings, a motivating factor that was ignored in the popular nineteenth-century fiction or that was depicted unrealistically. Dreiser is writing in opposition to fiction that ignored the money motive or that euphemistically portrayed it. Dreiser recognized and demonstrated the extent to which this monetary desire has replaced or is replacing other competing desires and the extent to which this money motive has affected art and religion.

Dreiser and other realists are in a unique position to describe these conflicting and contradictory motives because they experienced them.

In *An American Tragedy*, Clyde is obviously motivated by a desire for money, but this motivation is developed and revealed by contrasting it with conflicting desires that disclose antithetical values: familial, Christian, agrarian, and natural. And it is by means of this multifarious play of motivations, this shifting of points of view and value systems, that the power and ultimately the *reductio ad absurdum* of a purely monetary motive is revealed. If we consider the climactic act of the novel, Clyde's murder of Roberta (his first lover, a good friend, and the bearer of his unborn progeny), this act, from a monetary point of view, is intelligent. For this reason, Dreiser stated that Clyde's actions are pro-social, not anti-social.[2] If Clyde had been successful and had not been caught and had married Sondra, he, judged by a monetary value system, would have been a pillar of the community. The power of this novel is derived from Dreiser's ability to depict the pro-social aspects of what most would consider a deviant action, a murder. Dreiser explores this "monetary reduction," this extent to which the money motive has entered all aspects of our lives, by viewing the murder from other ideological perspectives. We thus realize the importance of the religious view of the poor Griffiths and of McMillan, the rural perspective of the citizens of Cataraqui County, and the agrarian values of Roberta and her family.

Borrowing Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism to examine the murder in *An American Tragedy*, we can judge Clyde's actions as rational only when considering them as motivated by a desire for money, only when all motivations are reduced to monetary considerations.[3] When set in any other value system, religious or natural, this act becomes monstrous.[4] Michaels is correct in recognizing Dreiser's fiction as involved in "monetary reduction," but Dreiser commits this "monetary reduction" in a movement toward absurdity—it is as though he is saying, "Okay, money is what everyone values. Now let's stop pretending it isn't. Let's see what happens to people who only value money—where does this end?" Dreiser's fiction represents the entelechy of a society that highly values money and that concentrates that "medium" in a few hands. When the quick, easy acquisition of money became the principle motivation of America's youth, the danger was not from capitalism but from outmoded value systems that ignored the effects of this money motive and that encouraged fiction that ignored the tragic results that monetary reduction produced.

By identifying Dreiser and other naturalists with a metaphorical desire to return to a "gold standard," New Historicists deny the social, communicative function of fiction. In denying the social function of literature, they limit their scope of purview to aesthetic considerations, creating a new gold standard for literature and art and involving themselves in a third and final contradiction: New Historicists, not Dreiser, become the ones longing for a golden medium.

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[1] In "*An American Tragedy*, or the Promise of American Life," Walter Benn Michaels insightfully explores the tragic social implication of mechanization.

[2] In several articles for *Mystery Magazine*, Dreiser explains his intentions in writing *An American Tragedy*, and he states that Clyde is not a deviant. Clyde in his actions is attempting to follow the value system of his society by the only means he knows (*Uncollected Prose* 291).

[3] Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism is evident in the following explanation of monetary reduction from *A Grammar of Motives*: "Thus, we had the spectacle of free men vying with one another to get work that was intrinsically very unpleasant, with little in its favor but the extrinsic monetary reward; they *volunteered* for tasks that, in previous economic scenes, men could have been induced to perform only by compulsion, as with slaves or convicts, or by such rare motives of voluntary service as are found in personal, familial fealties" (93).

[4] Both Dreiser's unpublished essay entitled "American Tragedies" and his series of articles for *Mystery Magazine* in 1935 (*Uncollected Prose* 291) corroborate this point.

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Index to Volumes 1-25

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Because *Dreiser Studies* began publication in 1970 as *The Dreiser Newsletter*, this cumulative index covers volumes 1-17 of *The Dreiser Newsletter* (DN) and volumes 18-25 of *Dreiser Studies* (DS). It is divided in three parts: a subject index, an index of publications reviewed, and an index of contributors.

The Subject Index is a guide to all articles, notes, and correspondence that have appeared in DN and DS. Included also are a number of reviews of adaptations of Dreiser's works and of lectures on Dreiser that were recorded on cassette tapes. Whenever possible a contribution is cited under the title of one of Dreiser's works, a historical figure, or a particular type of secondary work, such as "Checklists" and "Letters to the Editor." Contributions that required a broader heading usually appear under a genre, such as "Short Stories" and "Airmail Interviews," or a topic, such as "German Heritage." A few contributions that did not appropriately fall under any of the preceding categories appear under the heading "Miscellaneous." Contributions are cited only once with cross-references provided from other appropriate headings.

Reviews of books, special issues of journals devoted to Dreiser, and, in a few instances, significant essays on Dreiser appear under the name of the author or editor in the Index of Publications Reviewed. The reviewer's name appears in parentheses in the citation. In the Index of Contributors, reviews are grouped separately and cited after other contributions by the contributor.

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